

Theme of Death in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

Dr. Babu Lal Sharma

Associate Professor, Dept. of English

Govt. College, Palwal (Haryana)

Email: bldixit0509@gmail.com

Abstract

Many poets have written about Death but none has written so constantly and variously as Emily Dickinson. Born in the year 1830, she got her recognition as a poet approximately a hundred years after her birth. It is the year 1955 that can be described as a landmark in the field of Dickinson's literature. She was a poet of seclusion and solitariness. She wrote almost 1800 poems. She has written a number of poems on the subject of Death and the problems of life after death. The theme of Death is always obsessed with her. Her poems on death not only attract the attention of her readers but also have become the issues of critical research throughout the world. Dickinson believes that Death is an inescapable aspect of human existence and eventuality that awaits all living beings. Her poetry explores the enigmatic nature of death. In her poems, she has presented death as a complex and puzzling phenomenon, leaving the reader with unanswered questions. She preferred to remain in her own world with her typical choices. The poems of Dickinson are an expression of her own world. Her poems focus on the transient nature of life and the certainty of death after life. While depicting the theme of Death, Emily Dickinson has done the same thing that Shakespeare and other Metaphysical poets have done.

Keywords

Life, Death, Seclusion, Transient, Confessional, Metaphysical.

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Emily Dickinson is considered as one of our greatest lyric poets of her time. Dickinson's poetry is confessional and attracts the critical attention like the poetry of Metaphysical poets or Shakespearean sonnets. The theme of death always finds a remarkable place in her poems. Death is the major theme of Dickinson's poetry. She has frequently mentioned Death along with frustrations, sufferings, pains, sorrows, griefs and loneliness in her poems. Critics have pointed out that nearly one-third of her poetry is concerned with the theme of death. Her preoccupation with death has made her a poet of darkness. She has portrayed Death from every possible aspect – as the courtly lover, the dreadful assassin, the physical corruptor and also as a free agent in nature. She was too obsessed with the problems of death and subsequent life after death that all these things have become a major part of the content of her poems. She died all her life and experienced death daily in her life. Death with its horrible uncertainties and doubts about immortality, have produced the sharp and intellectual works of Emily Dickinson. Her preoccupation with the death may be the result of her involvement in religion. Her notions about God, Eternity, Time, Immortality, Infinity, etc. are responsible for her growing interest in death. Dickinson accepts that death is a physical fact and material truth.

Emily Dickinson's obsession with death may also be attributed to her Puritan surroundings. For the Puritans, death is the climax of living, and it must be accepted in a solemn way. Her rebellion against the doctrine of Puritanism taught her that death could not be a compensation for this life. Though she was a poet obsessed with the thought of death, she never became its champion. She has never done the glorification of death. In her poems on death, Miss Dickinson gives us a variety of experiences on this subject. She has closely examined the sensations of the dying and the responses of the onlookers. Through her poems, she has exhibited the terrible struggle of the body of her life and the adjustments in a house after death. She has not left even the rearranging of the body for the funeral and the church services untouched in her poems. Even the thoughts of the dead persons also have been expressed in her poems.

She had a strange fascination for death and imagined herself dead with mourners walking past her or lying in order to punish different friends. Dickinson's death poems deal with an intellectual point of view. She sees death as a culmination of human experience. She has written a series of death poems in which death is the thing that separates people from their beloveds. In the poem, "*I Died for Beauty*", the poet searches for the beauty all her life and dies at last in its search. Here she familiarizes the experiences of death as a sort of extension of experiences of this world. She tries to understand this experience as another form of human experience.

In some of her poems Emily Dickinson has contrasted the expectations of death with its realistic occurrence. “*I Heard A Fly Buzz When I Died*” is such an example in which she questions the medieval fundamental beliefs of the society. This poem is an ironic reversal of the conventional attitude towards the moments of death. She says:

“The eyes around – had wrung them dry-
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset- when hiking
Be witnessed- in the room-”

The king leaves an open question – Is it God or Death itself? The ending of the poem, however, does not suggest that it is God as it is clear in the poem

“With blue - uncertain stumbling buzz-
Between the light- and –
And then the windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -”

In this lyric, Dickinson describes the dramatic sensation and experience of the soul during its departure from the body. But she does not give any hint of living after this journey. We have a clear idea that instead of having a glimpse of heavenly light, the dying person only feels the familiar world around her fading away and slipping. This poem satirizes the traditional view of death as a peaceful release from life’s pressures and glorious entry into immortality. The last stanza of the poem depicts the dying man’s ultimate effort to live on this earth. But he could not “see to see”, his eyesight fails him, a curtain or barrier comes in front of his wish to continue living. This desperation on the part of the human being and their ultimate but inevitable surrender to the death of lap is presented in this poem at its best.

The idea that Death can be conquered if we accept it calmly, has been expressed by Emily Dickinson in a number of her poems. “*Because I could not stop for Death*” is the most significant example of this category. James Reeves has remarked in this reference;

“This is one of the best of those poems in which Emily triumphs over death by accepting it, calmly, civilly, as befits a gentlewoman receiving the attention of a gentleman. It is an essay on death in life. Only by civilizing death and by familiarizing herself with it can be brought within the scheme of what is tolerable and credible. The tone is tenderly ironic, the atmosphere tinged with sorrow for life and concern for the smallness of the human soul that must face inexorable death, solitary except for its immortality. The poem is simple, almost commonplace, yet the mystery that

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pervades it is inexhaustible. There is, within this mystery, a sense of reconciliation. To find anything like it we have to go to Prospero's closing speeches in "The Tempest". This exquisite lyric, "Because I Could Not Stop For Death", deserves to be quoted in full".

In this poem, death has been presented from various perspectives. It has been presented as a suitor and a decent civil functionary making a call upon a lady to take her for a drive. Death has been very polite to her in coming to stop at her doors to take her out. She also puts aside her work to give her a company:

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me,
The Carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

They started their journey slowly, passing the children playing at school and the ripe harvest in the field and finally came to the "House", the final abode of the grave whose roof was scarcely visible and whose cornice was in the ground. The "House" was so charming and marvelous that she lost the count of the time and realized as centuries had passed. Dickinson says in this poem:

We paused before a House that seemed
A swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

On the surface, this poem seems just like a version of procession to the grave, but it is also a metaphor of a different kind. It reduces the tensions of life. It is a force that exposes a person's satisfaction with life. Death and immortality have been viewed in two other ways also in this poem. Death is named as the bold lover and immortality as a protector. Death may also be viewed as a seducer and Immortality as her crime partner. The irresolution comes because she cannot honestly make up her mind about her feelings and attitudes towards her own death. With the expedition of death, the poet leaves her life; the life disappears behind her like a receding landscape.

Emily Dickinson has a variety of tones and treatments in the poem written on Death. In some of her poems, she witnesses her own death by doing anticipation. "You'll be sorry when I am dead" and "I want to die" are the examples of such poems in which she clearly seems to anticipate her own death. In other poems, she is contemplating the present destitution by loss. "My life closed twice before its close" is the poem where in she is anticipating her own death:

On such a night, or such a night,
Would anybody care
If such a little figure
Slipped quite from its chair –

In several of her poems, Emily has described the agonies and tortures caused by death but the dominant opinion that they produce in the mind of the readers is that death is not something to be feared. Death liberates human beings from the countless sufferings and the miseries that life in this sorrowful world is expected to face:

The clouds their backs together laid,
The North began to push,
The forests galloped till they mice;
The thunder crumbled like a stuff –
How good to be safe in tombs,
Where nature's temper cannot reach,
Nor vengeance ever comes!

Emily very frequently expresses the idea that death is the gateway to immortality. In one of her poems, she compares death to a pilot which takes the human soul to the shores of eternity:

On this wondrous sea,
Sailing silently,
Knowest thou the shore
Ho ! Pilot ho !

Just as the diver is rewarded with the pearl after taking plunge into the depth of the ocean and just the seraph has been raised to the first rank, similarly, immortality is the reward for human beings who face death calmly and boldly. Our attention should be focused on immortality rather than on death:

Pearls are Diver's farthing
Extorted from the Sea –
Pinions – the Seraph's wagon
Pedestrian once – as we
The night is the morning's Canvas
Larceny – legacy-

"I Felt a Funeral, In My Brain", is one of her poems written on the extremity of pains and suffering. In this poem, Dickinson describes the experience of death. She is oppressed on the material level by the world of "sense" which is attempting to

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bury her. Her brain, her mind and her soul are floors on which mourners tread carelessly, funeral drums beat, and coffin-bearers creak with their boots of lead". She feels as if her mind is going numb. Her experience of the spiritual world is also deafening and results in an equally intense feelings of isolation:

Then space began to toll
As all the heavens are a bell
And Being but an ear,
And I and silence some strange race
Wrecked solitary here.

The reader of the Emily Dickinson's poetry is often tempted to ask the question of whether her personality is revealed in it or not. Some readers and critics believe that Dickinson's poetry is autobiographical. Their logic is that whatever a poet describes in his or her poetry must be rooted in his or her personal experiences. T.S. Eliot has said, "The man who suffers and the artist who creates are two different beings". This saying completely applies to Emily's poetry.

Emily Dickinson's approach to life is tragic because it is filled with the pain and suffering. A melancholy note in her poems intensifies its tragic intensity. Her mind is always haunted by the fear of death. The repeated tragedies in her family in the form of the untimely loss of her family members and friends had filled the fear of death in her mind. Dickinson's ill health had always made her more conscious about her approaching death. Having been deprived of desired orthodox sustaining religious faith and having being suffered at the hand of the hostility of nature, she had always been obsessed with death. Consequently, the same has been reflected in her poetry.

Dickinson does not believe that death is always devastating and destructive. According to her, it sometimes proves a blessing in disguise by bestowing a definite identity upon a man which is denied to him during his life. Death brings release from the stresses and strains of life and brings the man closer to the God. It rather brings a man in a safer situation because a dead person is not affected by any kind of suffering, torture, fear, revenge and anger after his or her burial.

"How good to be safe in tombs
Where nature's temper cannot reach,
No vengeance ever comes.

Death is an undisturbed 'long sleep' which finally paves the way for the new life"

Dickinson's mind was so much preoccupied with death that she believes in the deathlessness of death. She strongly believes that there is none above death and a man's fate is closely associated with it. All man-made creations are subject to

decay and perish with the passage of time but death remains forever. Her treatment of death is quite convincing and realistic. She never gets her involved in sentimentalizing and glorifying death. The fear of death is never absent in her poetry. Her main characteristic is that she is always ready to face the death without any protest. She is never afraid of death and considered it as a natural corollary of life.

Emily Dickinson started her poetic writing without purpose of making it public. Her poems do not induce the feelings of despair or depression in the readers. The readers are able to understand these poems in the right spirit, they can derive a good deal of strength to face death which comes to all, sooner or later. She stands apart from the whole writing community of this field. Her portrayal of Death and its inevitability in human life brings her close to many other legendary poets of English literature. She is unique in her choice of words and self imposed seclusion. She is considered to be a unique voice of American poetry the solitary voice of loneliness and amongst in literature. Though she does not attempt to philosophize the notion of death and also does not put the burden of words into poetry; she successfully catches the attention of readers and critics working on the theme of death in the poetry.

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